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**THE EUROPEAN REGIONAL ORDER IN THE WESTERN BALKANS
FACING THE DISRUPTING ROLE OF MIDDLE AND GREAT
EMERGING POWERS**

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The European regional order in the Western Balkans facing the disrupting role of middle and great emerging powers

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Abstract

This EUCROSS Working paper analyses the European regional order in the Western Balkans which is more and more challenged by the projection of the emerging powers in this region. In other words, it aims to analyse the new international balance of power in the context of the diffusion of global power in a changing world order. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part explains particularly the context of the penetration of emerging powers into a European space as is the region of the Western Balkans. The second focus on their objectives and strategies to challenge the European regional order. Finally, the third studies the European response in order to remain the most visible player in the Western Balkans.

Keywords

Western Balkans, European Union, Emerging powers.

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1. Introduction

In the face of this changing international context, the European Union (EU) and some of its Member States have raised awareness by recently launching several enlargement initiatives. In order to prepare for future membership the six Western Balkan states (WB6) – Albania, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia – and shape their institutional identities through the export of their norms and values, the EU and some of its Member States have recently launched several initiatives such as the establishment of the Berlin Process (2014-2018), the adoption by the European Commission of a enlargement strategy (2018) and the Sofia Summit (2018).

Indeed, following the summits of Zagreb and Feira (2000), and especially that of Thessaloniki (2003), the EU promised its enlargement towards the Western Balkan countries according to the so-called case-by-case or merit principle. Nonetheless, since 2008, the EU as a normative and civilian power has been weakened by multiple crises (economic, political, migratory) which have also affected the process of enlargement and Europeanization of the Western Balkans. For reasons both internal and external to the states of the Western Balkans and to the EU itself, they have not yet joined the common European project and the EU enlargement process has slowed down. In this context, international or regional emerging powers such as Russia, China and Turkey have taken advantage of the situation to project themselves and increase their influence in the region, thus competing with the EU. They are projecting their influence in the Western Balkans into varying degrees and fields as diverse as political, economic, financial, commercial, military, ideological, cultural or religious.

This contribution aims to answer the central question of the contests posed by the penetration of emerging powers in the Western Balkans for the European regional order in this region. In other words, it aims to analyse the new international balance of power in the context of the diffusion of global power in a changing world order. Concretely, how the emerging powers are challenging the European regional order in the Western Balkans? How the EU and its Member States are facing the projection of emerging powers in the region? This paper will try to provide answers to these various questions.

To do this, the first part will be devoted particularly to the context of the penetration of emerging powers into a European space as is the region of the Western Balkans. In the second, the study will focus on their objectives and strategies to challenge the European regional order. Finally, in the third, the analysis will aim to explain European response in order to remain the most visible player in the Western Balkans.

2. The context of the penetration of emerging powers in the Western Balkans

Since the end of the wars of the 1990s in the Western Balkans, European authorities had come up with a new strategy that was presented at the Feira Summit (2000) and from Zagreb (2000). This strategy declared for the first time Western Balkan countries as potential candidates for membership¹. Later, at the Thessaloniki Summit (2003), the European perspective of these countries is also reaffirmed². This ambitious vision aimed to put an end to the long democratic transition in order to transform the Western Balkans into a region of peace, stability and economic prosperity, the ultimate goal of which would be its full membership of the EU. This strategy is called the Stabilization and Association Process (SAP). Through this twofold objective, the EU wanted, first of all, to stabilize this heterogeneous region and, secondly, to allow these countries to adhere definitively to the common European project. The SAP had created great hopes for change in the Western Balkans, fueled by the previous waves of enlargement (2004 and 2007) towards the former communist countries of the Central and Eastern Europe³.

Beyond geostrategic and economic interests, security was undoubtedly one of the main reasons that led the EU to open up to these countries. The security issue also presents the main motivation for the Western Balkan states to join the EU, which is perceived as a pole of attraction capable of neutralizing conflicts and pacifying the region⁴. In other words, the insecurity, the conflicts, the difficulties encountered for the reconstruction and the reconciliation of the various states, hostile to each other, as well as the improvement of its very image, pushed the EU and its Member States to play a more active role in the Western Balkans, adopting an enlargement strategy. Since then, the EU has become a key player in the region⁵. The European Commission has made consistent efforts to strengthen its transformative power to support the implementation of reforms, particularly in the areas of rule of law and economic governance in the region⁶. This enlargement policy, based on a pre-accession strategy, consisted in an Europeanization process and transmit of the *acquis communautaire* to future

¹ Santa Maria da Feira European Council, "Presidency Conclusions", Santa Maria da Feira, June 19 and 20, 2000.

² EU-Western Balkans Summit, "Declaration", Thessaloniki, 21 June, 2003.

³ Arolda Elbasani, "EU enlargement in the Western Balkans: strategies of borrowing and inventing", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, n° 10/3, 2008, p. 306.

⁴ Liridon Lika, "Risques et défis sécuritaires de la (non)-intégration des Balkans occidentaux dans l'Union européenne", in Sophie Wintgens, Geoffrey Grandjean, Stéphanie Vanhaeren (ed.), *L'insécurité en question : définition, enjeux et perspectives*, Liège, Éditions Presses Universitaires de Liège, 2015, pp. 123-124.

⁵ Charlotte Bretherton and John Vogler, *The European Union as a Global Actor*, London and New York, Routledge, 2006, p. 147.

⁶ European Commission, "Enlargement Strategy and Main Challenges 2014-15", *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions*, Brussels, 8.10.2014, COM(2014) 700 final, p. 1.

Western Balkan members⁷. By applying conditionality principles as in previous enlargements⁸ and disseminating its standards, values and norms, it has worked to ensure security, stability, regional cooperation and to affirm respect for human rights, the consolidation of democracy, the establishment of a model market economy and the rule of law. Thus, Europeanization of the Western Balkans is based on democratization, the need for regional stability, the strengthening of the rule of law and the creation of a viable market economy⁹. This European strategy towards the Western Balkans fits with Ian Manners's statement that the EU is a normative power, based on a solid foundation of values, norms and an identity that guides its foreign policy¹⁰. Others, like Mario Telò, claim that the EU is an incipient civilian power based on multilateralism, socio-economic influence, enlargement, or multi-level governance¹¹. This civilian power would result from a combination of a specific social model within the EU and the promotion of certain values coupled with a vision of regional power abroad. The EU assistance was conditional on respect for European norms and values and aimed at institutional building¹². Dimitar Bechev demonstrated that "[b]eyond the carrot-and-stick strategies proceeding from the application of membership conditionality, the EU has wielded considerable ideational power as promoter of certain normative notions of appropriate state behavior"¹³.

However, the balance sheet (results) of the enlargement policy remains mixed. The WB6 are dragging on in this process. Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro and Serbia have already achieved candidate country status. These four states are therefore more advanced in the accession process. However, there are differences between them: Montenegro (since 2012) and Serbia (since 2014) have opened accession negotiations, while Albania and North Macedonia hope to open as soon as possible (during 2019) the first chapters of negotiations. Bosnia and Herzegovina and Kosovo both have still potential candidate status, which means that they are currently further away in the accession process. Thus, the WB6 have not progressed at the same pace, because it is conditioned by the so-called "merit principle", which is strongly criticized by some in the name of a collective regional policy that promotes the block membership of WB6 in order to avoid the dividing lines and the gap between the pioneers and the latecomers; in a region marked by post-conflict trauma, competition has not proved very

⁷ Othon Anastasakis, "The Europeanisation of the Balkans", *Brown Journal of World Affairs*, vol. 12, n° 1, 2005, p. 78.

⁸ Stephan Keukeleire and Tom Delreux, *The Foreign Policy of the European Union*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, p. 209.

⁹ Geoffrey Pridham, "Democratizing the Western Balkans: challenges and burdens for the European Union", *International Issues & Slovak Foreign Policy Affairs*, vol. 17, n° 3, 2008, pp. 86-89.

¹⁰ Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?", *Journal of Common Market Studies (JCMS)*, vol. 40, n° 2, 2002, p. 252.

¹¹ Mario Telò, "The EU as an incipient civilian power. A systemic approach », *Politique européenne*, n° 22, 2007/2, pp. 37-42.

¹² Lucia Quaglia, Mari Neuvonen, Machiko Miyakashi and Michelle Cini, "Europeanization", in Michelle Cini (eds.), *European Union Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 405-419.

¹³ Dimitar Bechev, "Carrots, sticks and norms: the EU and regional cooperation in Southeast Europe", *Journal of Southern Europe and the Balkans*, vol. 8, n° 1, 2006, p. 28.

constructive so far because values dear to the EU such as formation of collective identity, cooperation, solidarity and trust have been neglected¹⁴. For example, the disputes between Greece and North Macedonia over the name of the latter consisted an unsolved problem until 2019, which also had consequences for the enlargement of the EU. Nowadays, two challenges remain still to be closed before accession to the EU, namely constitutional reforms in Bosnia and Herzegovina, and the normalization of bilateral relations and reciprocal official recognition between the Republic of Kosovo and the Republic of Serbia.

The Western Balkans is an important geostrategic region for international actors such as the United States and the EU. However, Washington's commitments in other parts of the world, such as the conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya or more recently in Syria, and the EU's concerns about its own economic and political problems have created a political, economic and security vacuum in the region¹⁵. Believing that the democratic future of the Western Balkans was tied to the EU, Washington largely entrusted the EU with responsibility for the political, institutional and economic development of the region; something it has not managed to fully assume, leaving space for action for other emerging international actors. The European crisis had spillover effects for the Western Balkans, leading to a relative lack of interest on the part of the EU, whose objectives and commitments for enlargement to the region proved slow and difficult. Political inertia in the EU – combined with internal concerns, economic and refugee crises, and pressures from far-right parties – meant that the Western Balkan states could not engage reforms necessary for any form of integration, neither 'internal' nor with the EU. Since 2008, some EU Member States have experienced successive waves of economic and financial crises that have led to the adoption of austerity policies that have affected both the Eurozone and the EU Member States and those of the Western Balkans¹⁶. Between 2008 and 2014, all states in the region were experiencing a decline of industrial production, a rise of unemployment, a contraction of foreign direct investment (FDI) and remittances from the diaspora; and this has led to a significant increase in the activities of a number of international financial institutions in the region, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF)¹⁷. The negative effects of the crisis in the Western Balkans have also been felt in the area of banking and financial services. This sector is more particularly controlled by institutions of the EU Member States (Austria, Italy, France, Slovenia and Greece). Interdependence exposed the countries of the Western Balkans to the crisis in the Eurozone. In other words, all the political

¹⁴ Florent Marciacq, "The EU and the Western Balkans after the Berlin Process. Reflecting on the EU Enlargement in Times of Uncertainty", *The Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung*, Sarajevo, 2017, p. 17.

¹⁵ Gordon N. Bardos, "The Balkans, Post-Pax Americana", *The National Interest*, October 1, 2012, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/the-balkans-post-pax-americana-7537>, (accessed on May 28, 2019).

¹⁶ John O' Brennan, "'On the Slow Train to Nowhere?' The European Union, 'Enlargement Fatigue' and the Western Balkans", *European Foreign Affairs Review*, 19, n° 2, 2014, p. 231.

¹⁷ Ritsa Panagiotou, "The Greek crisis as a crisis of EU enlargement: how will the Western Balkans be affected?", *Southeast European and Black Sea Studies*, vol. 13, n° 1, 2013, pp. 91-92; Riinvest, "The Power of Diaspora!", *Institute for Development Research Riinvest*, Prishtina, Republic of Kosovo, April 14, 2017.

and economic problems of the Western Balkans, combined with the economic setbacks of the EU and the “fatigue of enlargement” have contributed to the creation of a relative “power vacuum” in the region¹⁸. This state of affairs is defined by Flor Avelino and Jan Rotmans as “[...] a situation in which a contingency impedes the exercise of systemic power; the [international] environment confronts actors with a new situation while they are not able to mobilize the necessary resources to deal with it”¹⁹. As a result, the influences of Russia, Turkey and China have increased sharply in the region. The latter have adopted different strategies to set up themselves in the region. Delays in EU membership and growth of the influence of emerging powers in the Western Balkans are also associated with the dynamics of the region’s states²⁰. Thus, the procrastination and the European crises (2008-2014) have had some geopolitical consequences for the Western Balkans and the European regional order.

3. The objectives and strategies of emerging powers to challenge the European regional order in the Western Balkans

The concept of power is central to the study of International Relations. Realism postulates that states seek alliances and power balances. And it is precisely the national interest which, based on the power and the anarchistic competition between the states, leads according to Hans J. Morgenthau to a balance of power in the sense that they threaten each other²¹. In addition, the founder of neorealist theory of International Relations, Kenneth N. Waltz, proposes a set of criteria for defining a great power: “[...] size of population and territory, resource endowment, economic capability, military strength, political stability and competence”²². According to Waltz, the international structure is anarchic, since no political authority supplants those of sovereign states: “[a]mong men as among states, anarchy, or the absence of government, is associated with the occurrence of violence”²³. Raymond Aron, on the other hand, defines “[...] power on the international stage [as] the ability of a political unit to impose its will on other units”²⁴. In the analysis of the power of an actor, Joseph Nye mobilizes two notions of power, namely hard power based on the military and economic factor, and soft power considered as an indirect means of influence (the seduction capacity of a country to achieve its own goals, without using force, but through intangible resources such as attraction, positive image, values and

¹⁸ Othon Anastasakis, “Turkey’s Assertive Presence in Southeast Europe: Between Identity Politics and Elite Pragmatism”, in Kerem Öktem, Ayşe Kadioğlu, Mehmet Karlı (ed.), *Another Empire? A decade of Turkey’s Foreign Policy Under the Justice and Development Party*, Istanbul, Istanbul Bilgi University Press, 2012, p. 202.

¹⁹ Flor Avelino and Jan Rotmans, “Power in Transition An Interdisciplinary Framework to Study Power in Relation to Structural Change”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 12, n° 4, 2009, p. 555.

²⁰ Solveig Richter & Natasha Wunsch, “Money, power, glory: the linkages between EU conditionality and state capture in the Western Balkans”, *Journal of European Public Policy*, February 2019, pp. 6-17.

²¹ Hans J. Morgenthau revised by Kenneth W. Thompson, *Politics among nations: The Struggle for Power and Peace*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, Sixth Edition, 1985, p. 189.

²² Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics*, London, Addison-Wesley, 1979, p. 131.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 102.

²⁴ Raymond Aron, *Paix et Guerre entre les Nations*, Paris, Calmann-Lévy, 2004, p. 58.

culture)²⁵. In this perspective, power would consist of material and immaterial elements. The first, quantified, apprehend population, territory, natural resources, economic strength or military force, while the second, non-quantified, would include the national cohesion, ideology, culture, religion and influence on international institutions. But to complete this definition, according to Sebastian Santander, the representation, perception, and recognition of the actor must also be taken into account²⁶.

Following the disappearance of the bipolar world and in the post-2000 international context, the EU is challenged by the rise of emerging powers at the global level. Even if the emerging powers do not always have a common vision and do not form a homogeneous block, they see themselves as the future while the EU as the past. For Sebastian Santander, the emerging powers promote the spread of global power and gradually calling into question the international order that has been dominated for centuries by the traditional Western powers²⁷. The great emerging powers first appeared under the acronym BRIC (Brazil, Russia, India and China) devised by the researcher Jim O'Neill of the international bank Goldman Sachs as a practical label to qualify these countries²⁸. Other waves of emerging middle powers later gathered under the acronym CIVETS, grouping together Colombia, Indonesia, Vietnam, Egypt, Turkey and South Africa, or under the abbreviation MİKTA: Mexico, Indonesia, South Korea, Turkey and Australia. Thus, whereas China and Russia are usually considered as great emerging powers, according to Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi, "Turkey is an emerging middle power that has developed a near-BRICS active foreign policy while is member of the G-20 and MİKTA group, even if in the last years his label is increasingly contested"²⁹. In other words, Turkey, which display and projects economic, military, political, and ideological influence especially but not exclusively in its near region, is qualified by scholars as an emerging middle power³⁰. In summary, since the first decade of this century China, Russia and Turkey had sustained economic development and did not hesitate to deploy efforts to increase their presence on the world stage by adopting ambitious and multidimensional policies both regionally and internationally.

As the EU procrastinated, China, Russia and Turkey were actively working to increase their influence in the Western Balkans. Just as in the past when it was a crossroads of interests

²⁵ Joseph S. Nye JR, *The Paradox of American Power*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 4-9.

²⁶ Sebastian Santander, "Ordre mondial, hégémonie et puissances émergentes", in Sebastian Santander (eds.), *L'émergence des nouvelles puissances : vers un système multipolaire ?*, Paris, Ellipses, 2009, p. 24.

²⁷ Sebastian Santander (eds.), *Puissances émergentes : un défi pour l'Europe ?*, Paris, Ellipses, 2012, p. 10.

²⁸ Goldman Sachs, "Dreaming with BRICs: The Path to 2050", *Global Economics*, Paper n° 99, 2003, p. 2.

²⁹ Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi, "Towards the peripheries of the Western World: Eurasian regional policies in Latin America", *Anuario de Integración*, n° 3, 2016, pp. 62-63.

³⁰ Jana J. Jabbour, *La Turquie: L'invention d'une diplomatie émergente*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2017, pp. 27-28; Emel Parlar Dal, "Profiling Middle Powers in Global Governance and the Turkish Case: An Introduction", in Emel Parlar Dal (eds.), *Middle Powers in Global Governance: The Rise of Turkey*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018, pp. 1-32; Federico Donelli and Ariel Gonzalez Levaggi, "Becoming Global Actor: Te Turkish Agenda for the Global South", *Rising Powers Quarterly*, vol. 1, Issue 2, 2016, pp. 93-115.

of many major foreign powers, the region again represents an important strategic crossroads. Based on the balance of power, the game of alliances and geopolitical issues, the great European powers became involved in the Balkans during the conferences of Berlin (1878), London (1913) and Versailles (1919). The Western Balkans have again turned into a competitive arena between the great powers, as in the nineteenth century³¹, through the penetration and political, economic and military growth of Russia in Serbia, in the federated entity of the Serbs of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Montenegro and North Macedonia. For its part, Turkey has also projected its multidimensional influence in states such as Albania, Kosovo, North Macedonia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but also in Serbia and parts of Montenegro. As for China, it prints its economic and financial influence, particularly in Serbia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, North Macedonia and Montenegro. The difference from the nineteenth century is that Russia and Turkey are two powers that historically had designs, while China is a recent power for the region.

With regard to Russia, Moscow stated that it had great ambitions of influence in the Western Balkans which, from its point of view, constitute a geostrategic region, reason why, as in the past, the authorities under the presidency of Vladimir Putin, manifested aims towards it³². There is therefore a return, or a progressive influence, of Russia in some countries of the Western Balkans. Moscow continues to promote its own political, economic and traditional ties with some countries in the region, presenting itself to them as a closer ally than the EU. Over the centuries, it has claimed a special relationship with the Slavic and Orthodox communities of the Western Balkans. This perception is also rooted in the Slavic and Orthodox population of the region, mainly in Serbia, which currently holds the status of candidate country to the EU. Serbs and Russians share close historical, political, religious and cultural ties. Serbia is a Russophile country and Vladimir Putin enjoys a solid popularity; and, at the same time, it is progressing in the agenda of accession to the European project. At a time when relations between Russia and the West are at the lowest, Serbia is positioning itself between the two, insisting that European integration is in its eyes a priority, while maintaining close ties with its traditional Russian ally.

The apparent aims and tactics of Russia were to create a bloc of four neutral states, even pro-Russian, that would encompass the vast majority of Slavic and Orthodox Christians in Serbia, Montenegro, North Macedonia and Bosnia-Herzegovina³³. In order to pursue this geopolitical objective, Moscow has created numerous networks of organizations operating in these four

³¹ Blerim Reka, "History is back in the Balkans", *Geopolitical Intelligence services (GIS)*, July 15, 2016, <https://www.gisreportsonline.com/history-is-back-in-the-balkans.politics.1918.report.html>, (accessed on May 9, 2019).

³² Vsevolod Samokhvalov, *Russian-European Relations in the Balkans and Black Sea Region. Great Power Identity and the Idea of Europe*, Cham, Palgrave Macmillan, 2017, pp. 169-209.

³³ Jonathan Stevenson (ed.), "Balkan rumblings", *Strategic Comments, The International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS)*, vol. 23, n° 20, June 20, 2017, p. 1.

countries whose political representatives made frequent trips to Russia. Many of them also signed a cooperation agreement with President Vladimir Putin's "United Russia" party. Russian policymakers also expressed their support for anti-Western parties and governments, such as: in North Macedonia, support for the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organization – Democratic Party for Macedonian National Unity (VMRO-DPMNE), in power from December 2006 to May 2017; in Montenegro, considerable financial support for the November 2016 elections to the Democratic Front (FD), the political party of the Serbian minority opposing Montenegrin membership in NATO; in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Moscow not only behaves like the protector of the Serbian entity, led by the nationalist Milorad Dodik, but militarizes and encourages the secessionism of the later from the Bosnian state³⁴. Thus, in order to reinforce its influence, Russia intervenes in electoral processes and supports individuals, leaders, political parties and extremist groups that threaten peace in the region by distributing financial and military aid to them. One of the most striking examples is the failed coup in Montenegro aimed at eliminating politically and physically Montenegrin leader Milo Đukanović, known for his pro-Western sympathies. Meanwhile, in the southern Serbian city of Nish, Moscow has built a so-called "Russian humanitarian center", suspected of being a military center of Russian intelligence services. Russia has for years been applying anti-NATO and anti-EU doctrine to Western Balkan countries. Moreover, unlike the West, Russia, interested in a situation of instability in the Balkans, opposed the Prespa agreements and encouraged the citizens of North Macedonia to boycott the popular consultation for the change of name of this country.

With the exception of Serbia, and partly Bosnia and Herzegovina, all states in the region are now members of NATO (Albania, Montenegro), engaged in an accession process (North Macedonia) or have clearly expressed a demand in this direction (Kosovo). With the arrival of Montenegro in the Alliance, the entire Adriatic Sea is now under its control. Serbia remains the only country in the Western Balkans, or even the Balkans as a whole, through which Russia tries to maintain or re-develop its hegemonic influence in this region³⁵. As a result, the Russian state continues to support Serbia, as it has done in the past.

Serbia maintains ambiguous and antagonistic relations with the EU. On the one hand, it has, several years ago, adopted a policy of acceleration to European accession and, on the other hand, it pursues diplomacy contrary to that of the EU, by supporting Russia in the Ukrainian crisis in particular. As a result, Hoyt Brian Yee, a senior US State Department official in charge of European and Eurasian Affairs, made it clear that Serbia: "cannot sit on two chairs at the

³⁴ Reuf Bajrović, Richard Kraemer, and Emir Suljagić, "Bosnia on the Chopping Block: The Potential for Violence and Steps to Prevent it", *Foreign Policy Research Institute*, March 2018, pp. 5-10.

³⁵ Thomas E. Graham, Jonathan E. Levitsky, Cameron P. Munter, Frank G. Wisner, with Contributions by Mark D. Stadnyk, & Stephen C. Whittaker, "Time for Action in the Western Balkans. Policy Prescriptions for American Diplomacy", *East West Institute and National Committee on American Foreign Policy*, New York, May 2018, p. 16.

same time, especially if they are that far apart”³⁶. Therefore, in order to comply with the criteria for accession to the common European project, the candidate countries have the obligation to clearly display a European vision and to align themselves with the EU's foreign policy.

The Russian authorities are working tirelessly to strengthen anti-EU and anti-NATO sentiment in the Western Balkans. They encourage interethnic divisions through disinformation campaigns, deliberately fueling the tensions that led to the wars of the 1990s. The impact of this Russian strategy is consequent because opinion polls have shown that through the spread of such information Serbian citizens wrongly perceive Russia as a major contributor to Serbia long before the EU³⁷. Indeed, Russia has put in place a complex communication strategy, served by substantial means in favor of some digital or traditional Serbian media. Similarly, Russian media are omnipresent, such as Sputnik, an international multimedia news agency formally launched by the Russian government in 2014 and broadcast in Serbian³⁸. In addition, a number of press groups that frequently combine conspiracy theories and Serbian ultranationalism are funded by the Russian authorities in order to reinforce the world view of the Russian state: “[t]hese include periodicals and online portals such as Geopolitika, Vostok, News Front, Ruski ekspres, and Gazeta. Last but not least, there are local outlets that explicitly back the Kremlin (Pravda, Pečat, Oslobođenje, Srbin.INFO, Snaga Naroda radio, and the Macedonian portal Infomax)”³⁹. Moreover, Russian strategic communications are supported by a network of diverse organizations, ranging from government agencies to government-supported non-governmental organizations (NGOs), which also include associations, student groups, political parties, and the Orthodox Church.

Like Russia, Turkey has benefited from its emergence as well as from the European crisis to also grow its presence in the Western Balkans by increasing its all-round influence. In fact, because of the prevarications of the Europeans, Turkey, like the other emerging powers, has found a relative empty space to project itself. In the absence of a clear and strategic EU approach to the region, Turkish diplomacy is trying to fill a diplomatic void and strengthen its position as a regional leader⁴⁰. Unlike its initial commitment during the 1990s, in the areas of, essentially, regional peace and stability, after the Justice and Development Party's (JDP or AKP in Turk) victory in the 2002 parliamentary elections, Turkish foreign policy began a major shift. The arrival of the JDP has created a new dynamic in the Turkish view

³⁶ Daniel McLaughlin, “Russia angry as US official tells Serbia to choose EU or Moscow”, *The Irish Times*, October 25, 2017, <https://www.irishtimes.com/news/world/europe/russia-angry-as-us-official-tells-serbia-to-choose-eu-or-moscow-1.3268845>, (accessed on May 8, 2019).

³⁷ European Union Institute for Security Studies with contributions from Antonio Missiroli, Jan Joel Andersson, Florence Gaub, Nicu Popescu, John-Joseph Wilkins ad al., “Strategic communications East and South”, *Report*, Paris, n° 30, July 20, 2016, p. 22.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁰ Ronald H. Linden and Yasemin İrepoğlu, “Turkey and the Balkans: New Forms of Political Community”, *Turkish Studies*, vol. 14, Issue 2, 2013, p. 238.

towards the EU and penetration of the Western Balkans. To assert itself as a regional leader, Ankara has put in place a comprehensive, multifaceted, multidimensional, proactive, and so-called “zero problem with all neighboring countries” strategy. Since the region has been under Ottoman rule for almost five centuries, the Turkish authorities have considerably intensified their efforts to increase their influence where possible. It mobilizes cultural, religious and historical aspects, sometimes economic features as starting points for the deepening penetration in many fields⁴¹. For example, countries such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, North Macedonia, Albania, Montenegro and Serbia occupy a particularly important and strategic place in Turkish foreign policy. In this perspective, Turkey has adopted and consolidated a new speech and presented a new vision as to its role in the WB6.

Over the course of Erdoğan’s 17 years of leadership, Turkey has invested a great deal of effort and money to increase its political, cultural and economic influence in the Western Balkans. It has provided development assistance, conducted major infrastructure projects, opened schools and universities, built and/or rebuilt mosques, promoted Turkish investments in the region and promoted dialogue among peoples⁴². In short, Turkish political authorities and companies have invested in all strategic sectors that can promote national interests. Municipalities, the business community, NGOs, soap operas and individuals⁴³, all have become important actors in Turkey’s relations with the Western Balkans. In 2002, the value of trade between the Western Balkans and Turkey amounted to some 435 million US dollars, but in 2016 this figure rose to 3 billion, about seven times as much⁴⁴. By imitating EU policies, Turkey has invested heavily in human relations in order to develop the components of the Turkish soft power. By way of illustration, Birgül Demirtaş gives the example of the visa exemption for states of the Western Balkans, an initiative to create a visa-free zone in the region, that is to say a kind of Schengen area in Turkish style⁴⁵. The influence is even more remarkable, at the socio-cultural level, it is a real emanation of soft power through, for example, television series or Turkish soap operas, broadcast during the hours of great listening and become very popular⁴⁶. In addition, the Turkish Agency for International Cooperation and Development (TIKA) is funding numerous projects to rebuild the monuments dating from the time of the Ottoman Empire (mosques, bridges and schools). The Presidency of Turks Abroad

⁴¹ Birgül Demirtaş, “Turkish foreign policy towards the Balkans: A Europeanised foreign policy in a de-europeanised national context?”, *Journal of Balkan and Near Eastern Studies*, vol.°XX, n° X, 2015, p. 10.

⁴² Kerem Öktem, “Global Diyanet and Multiple Networks: Turkey’s New Presence in the Balkans”, *Journal of Muslims in Europe*, vol. 1, Issue 1, 2012, p. 31.

⁴³ Kemal Kirişçi, “Turkey’s Engagement with Its Neighborhood: A ‘Synthetic’ and Multidimensional Look at Turkey’s Foreign Policy Transformation”, *Turkish Studies*, 13 (3), 2012, pp. 319-341.

⁴⁴ Mehmet Uğur Ekinci, “Turkey and the Western Balkans: Stable Relations and Deepening Cooperation”, in Sasha Topperich and Aylin Ünver Noi (eds.), *Turkey and Transatlantic Relations*, Washington DC, Center for Transatlantic Relations, 2017, pp. 167-169.

⁴⁵ Birgül Demirtaş, *op. cit.*, pp. 9-10.

⁴⁶ Julien Paris, “Succès et déboires des séries télévisées turques à l’international. Une influence remise en question”, *Hérodote*, n° 48, 2013/1, p. 158.

and Related Communities (YTB), founded in 2010 and attached to the Office of the Prime Minister, coordinates the activities of NGOs and grants scholarships for students including those from the Western Balkans. The Yunus Emre Institute, a public foundation created in 2007 to promote Turkish language, culture and art, operates through several cultural centers in all countries of the region. Moreover, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, a public institution, supports religious education. Turkey mobilized two dubious political instruments: religion, namely the politicization of Islam, and neo-Ottomanism which, as a new geopolitical doctrine, consists in virtually reconstructing the old imperial space.

However, Western Balkan historians condemn all misfortunes inflicted on their countries during the Ottoman occupation. Official history generally describes the past as a centuries-long struggle to get freedom from the Ottoman yoke. According to Dimitar Bechev: “[a]s in the case of Greek, Bulgarian, Serb, Croatian and Romanian grand narratives, Albania’s struggle against Ottoman domination has been elevated into a contribution to the cause of rolling back Asiatic backwardness in the name of European civilization”⁴⁷.

China is also trying to expand and strengthen its influence and strategic presence in Europe including the Balkans. In 2012, it announced a new global initiative (16+1 initiative) for cooperation with sixteen countries of Central, Eastern and South Eastern Europe (CESEE), including Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina, but not the state of Kosovo which is not yet officially recognized by Beijing⁴⁸. The Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), formerly called One Belt, One Road (OBOR), initiated in 2013 by President Xi Jinping and also known as the New Silk Road, in addition to Asia, Africa and Latin America, also includes the European continent in general and the Western Balkans region in particular through significant economic and financial investments. The Balkan Silk Road is the name given to the transport and logistics corridor that Beijing has started to establish in the Balkans under the BRI⁴⁹. As part of this initiative, the Chinese are providing massive investments to carry out infrastructure projects in some Western Balkan countries⁵⁰. This economic presence has grown significantly and has become increasingly visible since 2015. Trade links have been strengthened, including through some bilateral agreements. Regarding the implementation of projects, Serbia stands out as the key partner of Beijing in the Western

⁴⁷ Dimitar Bechev, *Constructing South East Europe: The Politics of Balkan Regional Cooperation*, United Kingdom, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 70.

⁴⁸ Anastas Vangeli, “The impact of China”, in *Resilience in the Western Balkans, ISSUE Report*, n° 36, 2017, European Union Institute for Security Studies, Paris, p. 57.

⁴⁹ Jens Bastian, “The potential for growth through Chinese infrastructure investments in Central and South Eastern Europe along the ‘Balkan Silk Road’”, *Report prepared by Jens Bastian for the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (with funding from the Central European Initiative)*, Athens/London, 2017, p. 4.

⁵⁰ Magda Stumvoll and Tobias Flessenkemper, “China’s Balkans Silk Road: Does it pave or block the way of Western Balkans to the European Union?”, *Centre international de formation européenne (CIFE)*, Policy Paper n° 66, February 14, 2018, pp. 1-4.

Balkans⁵¹ especially since, beyond the historical relations Sino-Serbian and a growing Chinese political presence in Serbia, the latter is targeted by the Chinese authorities as the main point of support of the investment strategy BRI⁵². According to some sources, the total value of the projects financed is estimated at 6.2 billion euros, of which 2.6 in Serbia, 2.1 in Bosnia and Herzegovina, 0.9 in Montenegro and 0.6 in North Macedonia. The domains supported mainly concern the following three sectors according to the order of importance: roads, energy, railways⁵³. The Chinese presence is also growing in Albania and in Kosovo in recent years.

But, as elsewhere in the world, in Africa for example⁵⁴, such investments meet a strategic goal and are only granted in the expectation of a return. In this case, the geographical proximity of the Western Balkans to the EU, combined with their possibility to join the EU, represents an important prospect for Chinese economic operators to access the EU's single market⁵⁵. Strengthening the trade corridors used by Chinese companies aims to improve regional connectivity and, at the same time, facilitate the transport of goods to the European single market. In addition, Chinese projects tended to be treated outside normal project selection processes or procurement procedures⁵⁶.

Despite their increasing projection, the economic influence of the emerging powers remains far behind that of the EU. Indeed, there is a very strong economic interdependence between the EU and the Western Balkans. With 73% of trade exchange, the EU is by far the largest trading partner of the six Western Balkan states, followed by China with 5% and Russia with 4.8%⁵⁷. The exchanges between the EU and the Western Balkans have doubled in 10 years – from € 21.4 billion in 2006 to € 43.6 billion in 2016 – the EU was, in fact, the main market of the Western Balkans in 2016, 67% of imports and 83% of exports⁵⁸. The enlargement process has opened up new business opportunities for EU and Western Balkan companies. Since 2000, almost all exports can enter the EU without customs duties or quantitative restrictions; thus, exports to the EU increased from € 7.337 billion (2006) to € 17.740 billion (2016), while imports from the EU increased from € 14.08 billion (2006) to 25.92 billion (2016)⁵⁹. EU firms are by far the largest investors in the Western Balkans at 72.5%, followed

⁵¹ Barthélémy Courmont et Arta Seiti, "Belgrade-Pekin : Quand la Chine se positionne au cœur de l'Europe", *Institut de Relations Internationales et Stratégiques*, Paris, 2017, pp. 1-18.

⁵² Florent Marciacq, "La Chine dans les Balkans occidentaux : une présence croissante dans une région européenne", *Questions internationales*, n° 93, 2018, pp. 107-112.

⁵³ In this study, figures are lacking for Albania and Kosovo: Ruben Atoyan and al., *Public Infrastructure in the Western Balkans. Opportunities and Challenges*, Washington, International Monetary Fund, 2018, p. 33.

⁵⁴ François Lafargue, "La Chine en Afrique. Une utile mais encombrante présence", in Sebastian Santander (eds.), *L'Afrique, nouveau terrain de jeu des émergents*, Paris, Éditions Karthala, 2014, pp. 19-35.

⁵⁵ Ruben Atoyan and al., *op. cit.*, p. 33.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ Council of the European Union, "Infographic – EU and Western Balkans intertwined", 2018, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/infographics/western-balkans-economy/>, (accessed on May 5, 2019).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ *Loc. cit.*

by Russia (4.6%), Switzerland (3.7%), Norway (3%) and Turkey (2%)⁶⁰. In this sense, the Western Balkans have strong economic ties with the EU and the economic presence of the emerging powers does not generally worry Europeans; but they are especially concerned that Russia, China and Turkey may develop political and cultural influence to the detriment of the EU as the Western Balkan governments are free to establish close relations with partners who are less concerned with democratic standards than the EU. Thus, the projection of emerging powers in the Western Balkans poses some challenge for the EU. The current paradigm of international relations in the Western Balkans is part of the realistic theory, since strategic competition for power expansion is developing there. There are tendencies towards a multipolar competitive order in the Western Balkans, between the EU and the emerging powers (and the latter also among themselves), which have forced the European authorities to pay more attention to the region.

4. The recent European enlargement initiatives in the Western Balkans

While the EU has been the most visible player in the WB6 for over 20 years, the recent dynamics of emerging powers are seen as a direct threat to European interests. Their diplomatic and economic deployment therefore meets a response of the EU which wishes to maintain its authority in this region. Since 2014, some Member States and the EU have launched various European integration initiatives in the WB6 in order to remain the most important player in the region. The first of these is the Berlin Process which focused on regional cooperation, inter-connectivity and reconciliation in the Western Balkans. One hundred years after the outbreak of the First World War in Sarajevo, at the initiative of German Chancellor Angela Merkel, on August 28, 2014, the Berlin Conference was held to give new political support to the WB6 on the way towards EU accession⁶¹. Thus, this German diplomatic initiative is the starting point for the formalization of the Berlin Process, a term that took effect after the Berlin Conference (2014), followed by the Vienna (2015), Paris (2016), Trieste (2017) and London (2018).

The second European initiative is the European Commission's publication on February 6, 2018, of a document entitled: "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans"⁶². In this official document, the European Commission has announced its new plan for the WB6. This EU enlargement strategy is

⁶⁰ *Loc. cit.*

⁶¹ Final Declaration by the Chair of the Conference on the Western Balkans, Berlin, 28 August 2014, pp. 1-2.

⁶² European Commission, "A credible enlargement perspective for and enhanced EU engagement with the Western Balkans", *Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions*, Strasbourg, February 6, 2018, COM(2018) 65 final, pp. 1-18.

unambiguous and persevering: regional cooperation and good neighborly relations remain a prerequisite for the WB6, which aspires to join the European common project⁶³.

The Sofia Summit of May 17, 2018, is the third European initiative. At the first EU-Western Balkans summit in Thessaloniki, the EU reaffirmed its unequivocal support for the European perspective of the Western Balkans. But the EU's foreign policy has only produced declarations with little effect. Except for the case of North Macedonia, the EU and its Member States has been unable to resolve the bilateral conflicts in the Western Balkans. Fifteen years after the Thessaloniki summit, the second EU-Western Balkans summit was held in Sofia. It brought together heads of state or government from the 28 Member States, senior EU representatives and the leaders of the WB6. Bulgaria, which was at the time head of the EU Presidency, but also Austria, which followed it, have made the EU's enlargement to the Western Balkans a priority.

These three European initiatives in favor of enlargement to the WB6 are launched for a variety of reasons, including three main ones: firstly, those linked to the difficulties of enlargement towards the WB6 as well as growing Euroscepticism within the EU; secondly, those related to the new and changing geopolitical context on the European continent and around it, and third, those related to the European economic and financial crisis and its impact on the WB6. Firstly, the Berlin Process was launched in order to maintain, consolidate and even accelerate the momentum of the process of integration for WB6 into the common European project in the light of the increase of Euroscepticism within the EU and a large opposition from European citizens to a new enlargement. The refugee crisis that hit the EU, especially in 2015, was an opportunity for several extreme right-wing European parties to criticize the European project. Extreme right parties within the EU have adopted a position strictly in opposition to the European project⁶⁴. After the 2004 and 2007 enlargements, in several EU member states, enthusiasm for further enlargement, especially towards WB6, is at a low level. The reasons given by some authors are both specific to the EU ("enlargement fatigue") and WB6 (rule of law, corruption, unemployment, immigration, bilateral disputes)⁶⁵. The Berlin Process was also launched at a time when many critics emerged in the WB6 with regard to the EU, accusing it of failing to keep its promises and neglecting the states of the region in recent years. Furthermore, popular support for EU membership varies from state to state in the Western Balkans. For example, annual surveys of the Balkan Barometer provide figures on the perceptions and expectations of public opinion in the WB6 about European integration. Thus, the results of 2018 show a favorable opinion of citizens of states such as

⁶³ *Ibid.*, pp. 5-8.

⁶⁴ Geoffrey Grandjean, "Memory of the political construction of Europe in far right positions", in Jérôme Jamin (ed.), *L'extrême droite en Europe*, Brussels, Bruylant, 2016, pp. 407-409.

⁶⁵ John O' Brennan, *op. cit.*, pp. 221-241; Florian Bieber, "Patterns of competitive authoritarianism in the Western Balkans", *East European Politics*, vol. 34, n° 3, 2018, pp. 337-350.

Albania (83%), Kosovo (84%), North Macedonia (59%) and Montenegro (53%) to European integration; as for Bosnia and Herzegovina⁶⁶ and Serbia the responses are unfavorable because respectively 45% and 29% of citizens responded that accession to the EU is not a good thing⁶⁷. Albania and Kosovo are the two most pro-European states, followed by Montenegro and North Macedonia.

Secondly, the new initiatives have also taken place in a changing and turbulent geopolitical context on the European continent and in its immediate neighborhood. This is particularly in the context of Russia's aggression in Ukraine and conflicts in the Middle East and on the southern shore of the Mediterranean. Russia's intention and continued efforts to increase its influence not only in Eastern Europe, but also in the Western Balkans sent a signal of distress to the EU and some of its Member States. As a result, Russia's annexation of Crimea and its growing involvement in the WB6, especially in Serbia, and its interference in the internal affairs of North Macedonia and Montenegro are of concern to the EU and its Member States regarding the risks this poses for WB6 in particular and European collective security more broadly⁶⁸. Russia's involvement in these countries boosted the agenda of European enlargement and urged the Commission to retain 2025 as a plausible deadline for new memberships, especially for Serbia and Montenegro. Like Russia, the growing presence of Turkey and China in the region is not well received by Europeans, especially as these three countries try to propose alternative political models for WB6 and contrary to European values. Therefore, in promoting its enlargement strategy, the EU and its Member States also aimed to send a clear message not only to the WB6 but also implicitly to the emerging powers that the WB6 states are part of the European continent and their accession to the common European project has no other alternatives.

Thirdly, the new European commitment comes in the context of the post-European economic and financial crisis (2008-2014) which had a considerable impact on the WB6. However, the crisis has not completely interrupted the dynamics of cooperation, although it is true that it has created a lot of difficulties for the WB6 in their path of European integration. Therefore, the new European initiatives have probably sent the strongest pro-European message to the WB6 since the Thessaloniki summit.

⁶⁶ The inhabitants of this country are divided on community bases: Bosniaks and Croats are largely favorable to the EU accession, while Serbs are largely unfavorable.

⁶⁷ Balkan Public Barometer, "Attitudes on Regional Cooperation and EU integration – EU membership", *Regional Cooperation Council (RCC)*, <https://www.rcc.int/seeds/results/2/balkan-opinion-barometer>, (accessed on May 23 2019).

⁶⁸ Government of the United Kingdom, "PM Commons statement on European Council: 14 March 2017", *Oral statement to Parliament, Prime Minister Theresa May gave a statement to Parliament on the March EU Council meeting and next steps in preparing to trigger Article 50*, 14 March, 2017, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/pm-commons-statement-on-european-council-14-march-2017>, (accessed on May 8, 2019).

Conclusion

The Western Balkan region is fairly open and vulnerable to a large number of foreign influences. The EU enlargement process has slowed down for reasons both internal and external to the WB6 and the EU itself. The political and economic problems of the WB6, combined with those of the EU and its Member States, have created a hostile context in which European regionalism has continued but slowed down. The enlargement process has difficulties due to the development of a sort of skepticism by European citizens, especially in the founding states, towards the EU and the European project in general. European procrastination has created a relative “power vacuum” favoring the penetration of the emerging powers such as Russia, Turkey and China in the region. In other words, the EU has for a long time been pursuing an incoherent policy towards the WB6, slowed down by complex administrative and bureaucratic procedures, while Russia, Turkey and China have invested the field without preconditions.

The neglect of the WB6 mixed with the opening of various influences through the projections of the emerging powers constitute some threats, not only for the WB6 and their future prospects, but also for the EU and its Member States. On the one hand, Russia is offering the region of the WB6 exactly the opposite of the EU, namely: censorship, militarization, incitement to war, instability and non-accession to the EU and NATO. On the other hand, Turkey and China propose autocratic models, and non-democratic values and principles, both politically, economically and culturally. Thus, the multiple crises in and around the EU as well as the tense geopolitical situation in the WB6 have sent a signal of anxiety to the European leadership. Therefore, in the face of this changing internal and international context, the EU and some of its Member States have shown new awareness by launching three initiatives promoting enlargement: the Berlin Process (2014-2018), enlargement strategy of the European Commission (2018) and the Sofia Summit (2018). Their aim is to prepare the accession of the WB6 to the EU and to ensure and sustain long-term peace and stability in the region. Moreover, through these complementary initiatives, the Europeans have sent an important message to the WB6 and implicitly to the emerging powers, which are trying to strengthen their influence, that the accession of this region to the EU is a strategic priority for European diplomacy. Although peace has already been established, there are still bilateral disagreements in the WB6 that hinder progress towards the EU accession process. This explains why these states express the desire for greater involvement of the EU. Therefore, the launch of the European initiatives was more than necessary and welcome for the WB6. All countries responded favorably and their leaders have thus expressed their willingness to continue promoting European regionalism and to strengthen the dialogue and cooperation between them and with the EU.

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